

Consequences of Early Life Adversity – Evidence from Parental Psychiatric Hospitalizations

Background

Psychological studies point to parent-child attachment as a determinant of physical and cognitive child development. Literature on parental investment in child outcomes also link greater parental ability and engagement to persistently higher levels of cognitive and noncognitive skill in children. The impact of investment may differ by child age, due to critical development periods. As indicated by the intergenerational transmission literature, the effects of maternal and paternal investment may also differ, possibly due to gender differences in parenting.

Objectives

This project uses parental psychiatric hospitalizations to investigate the effects of parental deprivation and maltreatment during different childhood periods on adolescent human capital and health. Parental psychiatric hospitalization may reduce both quantity and quality of investment in children, by separating child and parent for a relatively long period, and due to mental illness reducing parenting ability and increasing the likelihood of neglect and abuse.

Data/methods

Using hospital data and information on ninth-year GPA and standardized test scores for the Swedish population born in 1978-1995, we exploit between-sibling variation in age at exposure to parental psychiatric hospitalization for identification. Estimating separate effects of mothers' and fathers' hospitalization, we investigate their respective importance in producing child health and human capital.

Results

We find greatly increased self-harm and substance-related hospitalization rates at age 15-20 and a slight reduction in girls' GPA related to mothers' psychiatric hospitalization. Fathers' hospitalization appears less detrimental to psychosocial health, but more damaging to human capital formation. The effects are greater for children exposed in early childhood.

Conclusions

Our results highlight the importance of an extended family focus in psychiatric care. They also reveal important differences in effects of lacking or inadequate care by mothers and fathers. These differences may be highly relevant to healthcare, educational and family policy.